Modeling Lifelong Learning: Collaborative Teaching across Disciplinary Lines

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Abstract. Most courses in colleges and universities are taught by only one instructor. This is often necessitated by the financial exigencies of educational institutions, but is also due to an academic tradition in which the ideal is a single expert teaching in a single discipline. The rapidly changing realities of both the higher education and job markets, however, have called the traditional ideal into question. Interdisciplinary collaborative teaching is one way to adapt to the needs of twenty-first-century students, by modeling lifelong learning for students and inviting instructors to be more deliberately reflective about disciplinary assumptions, learning styles, and pedagogies.

“Collaborative teaching” is a broad term that can include any and all configurations, whether long- or short-term, of two or more teachers working together with the same group of students. Although specific methods of collaboration vary significantly – everything from year-long learning communities to team-taught semester courses to one-day classroom exchanges1 – the simple act of collaborating across disciplines, particularly as a means of modeling lifelong learning, is the focus of this essay.

Most of us teach alone. The vision of an individual professor lecturing in front of a classroom full of attentive students is so iconic that it is hardly ever questioned. Such a vision is not only a product of our own experiences as students, but is reinforced by popular media images of bearded, tweed-clad white men that bombard our collective subconscious. According to one study, “traditional teaching” – in which an individual teacher determines the subject matter, organizes the syllabus, determines the means of evaluation, and lectures to students in rows – has been so widespread as to be an almost exclusive model in American colleges and universities (Davis 1995, 33–34).2

Our experiences as teachers, however, may cause us to question the wisdom of the received image. Upon finding ourselves responsible for a classroom full of impressionable young minds, or perhaps finding ourselves responsible for teaching subjects in which we have not been trained (World Religions, anyone?), we may suddenly come to the harsh realization that the model of the expert professor is more fantasy than reality.

1 For a helpful introduction to learning communities, see Cox (2004) and DuFour (2004). For a helpful definition of “team teaching” see Davis (1995, 6-8); for “interdisciplinary” see Davis (1995, 3-6).

2 Here he is citing Ernest Boyer’s study of teaching at twenty-nine colleges and universities (1987, 149). While this particular study was published in 1987, and Davis’s book was published in 1995, anecdotal evidence and my experience in the academy suggest that things have not changed significantly in the past two decades.
One response to this realization is to find ways to incorporate collaborative teaching strategies – especially across disciplinary lines – into our busy schedules. Inviting colleagues from other disciplines to enter our classrooms and share their expertise with us is a means, first and foremost, of acknowledging our own limitations; it is moreover to do so “out loud” in front of our students. For most of us, our roles as teacher and learner are “mutually exclusive: faculty are teachers in the classroom and then learners in the laboratory, library, or field” (Sorenson 2002, 3); the result is that students see us only as teachers, rather than as learners. Bringing these two roles together through collaborative teaching not only sets up a healthy model for our students, but can also invigorate our own pedagogy, scholarship, and departments. It is only through deliberate reflection on those practices and epistemological assumptions that we must take for granted that we can begin to discern which ones are helping us to meet our teaching goals and which ones may need updating.

Examining Our Defaults
Ask any provost or academic dean why most professors teach alone most of the time, and you will hear the most persuasive of all reasons: money. Why put two professors in a room with thirty or a hundred students, when one can do the same job more cost-effectively? Most institutions simply do not have sufficient funds to reduce the number of available credit hours offered by any single professor. “The lecture model – putting dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of students in a room with a professor – endures because it makes economic sense” (Berrett 2011). Pedagogical goals, however noble, are often powerless in the harsh light of budgets and seat counts.

Other reasonable prejudices against collaborative teaching may be disciplinary in nature. The demand for content coverage in any course or program already puts great pressures on limited classroom time, making something as intangible as “interdisciplinary dialogue” seem like an unaffordable luxury. A more cynical reading of these disciplinary boundaries has to do with ego: we faculty members may simply be reluctant to share the stage with someone who might question the ways we analyze the world, organize our syllabus, or conduct ourselves with our students. “No one,” we may believe, “has the right to come in my classroom” (Rice 2009). Religious studies professors, in particular, may be sensitive about how outsiders view our discipline – if indeed we can even call it a discipline given its methodological diversity, to say nothing of ongoing internal debate regarding the dubious heuristic value of the term “religion” itself. Our own insecurities about our status in the academy may make us loath to let, for example, an economist or psychologist or biologist talk to our students about religion. We may not wish to lose control of definitions; we may be anxious about the possibility of having religion reduced neatly to a matter of rational choice or childhood neurosis or evolutionary adaptation.

Besides fiscal and disciplinary rationales, there are also basic issues of personality that contribute to the default position, not all of which are cynical. For most of us, it is quite satisfying to teach alone. Many professors genuinely enjoy relating to students, both individually and in groups, and get a certain amount of excitement out of the challenge of teaching. We tend to enjoy our subject matter, and the solitary process of thinking through how we will organize a course can be highly pleasurable. Moreover, as possessors of specialized knowledge, we are generally confident about teaching at least those topics in which we are professionally credentialed (though those of us in very
small departments know that our teaching is not limited to such topics). In short, teaching alone is just easier. As one educator writes:

Teaching is a complex and delicate act . . . It demands that teachers analyze the situation, consider the variables of students, texts, knowledge, abilities, and goals to formulate an approach to teaching, and then to carry it out—every day, minute to minute, within the ever-shifting context of the classroom. It requires having empathy for students, a knowledge of one’s field, a sense of how learning occurs, the ability to generate a practice out of an idea, and the power to evaluate instantaneously whether it’s going well or needs adjusting. (Danielewicz 2001, 9)

Such instantaneous, minute-to-minute evaluation requires agility that may be hindered by having more than one cook stirring the pot. Of course, the potential for individual spontaneity may not necessarily compel us toward better teaching. Just the opposite may be true: “What many professors do, persistently without much self-reflection, is go into classrooms (alone because it is their classroom), start talking, and write things (as the spirit moves them) on the chalkboard” (Davis 1995, xiv; emphasis original).

Time is perhaps the most fundamental concern. Teaching that is truly collaborative, even for individuals with compatible personalities, schedules, and teaching styles, takes work. “The biggest challenge is . . . finding time to bring already busy people together to function as a team” (Laufgraben and Tompkins 2004, 54). The everyday realities of committee work, student advising, and research, not to mention personal health or family life, conspire to make it very difficult for well-intentioned teachers to make time for regular meeting, planning, and evaluation. Such deliberate and labor-intensive consultation is “a crucial element of successful team teaching,” though it may sometimes feel as if one is “drowning” in teaching duties (Neumann et al. 2006, 6).

Thus a variety of forces, both substantive and petty, both personal and institutional, create academic cultures in which flying solo in the classroom is the default position. Since eager learners throughout human history have traditionally only ever had one teacher at a time (did the Buddha, Socrates, or Jesus team-teach?), anyone who would seek to change the dominant model must offer a compelling argument. But those of us who are not the Buddha, Socrates, or Jesus know we need alternatives. Collaborative teaching—while certainly not the only alternative—is one way to help transform us into better teachers, in that it ineluctably “requires faculty members to change how they teach” (Laufgraben and Tompkins 2004, 68). Perhaps more importantly, it forces us to become more mindful about our teaching: “reflection may be the most important contribution of team teaching, allowing and requiring instructors to articulate and justify before their colleagues the choice of activities that take place in their classrooms” (Davis 1995, xiv). Collaboration, if done well, “can lead to the deep conversations we need to have about teaching and learning, and about our students, and it can plant vital seeds for institutional development and change” (MacGregor 2000, 9). The goal of this reflection and transformation, of course, is a higher quality of learning for our students.

3 Actually, one author writes, “While team teaching may seem new and experimental, it actually has a long career ranging from the Socratic dialogue to public medieval disputations” (Shafer 2001, 1). It may be not only a decades-old idea but a millennia-old one; but even with such an ancient pedigree, this model has yet to be reflected in the dominant models of higher education pedagogy.
Collaboration and the Goals of Liberal Education

Ultimately we should collaborate with other teachers only if it benefits our students and helps us achieve our pedagogical goals. Anytime we reflect upon the goals of our work as individual scholar-teachers in the study of religion, it is important to first reconnect ourselves to the broader purposes of higher education itself. The Boyer Report on *Reinventing Undergraduate Education* argued that any healthy university is an “ecosystem” constituted by a shared mission, namely “a deep and abiding understanding that inquiry, investigation, and discovery are the heart of the enterprise” (Boyer Commission 1998, 9). This is no less true of liberal arts colleges, where these things also happen albeit on a much smaller scale. Every player in a college or university is there to contribute to this shared mission of learning – “shared” being the word most easily forgotten when we are in the midst of our quotidian duties of lesson plans, grading, and advising. At my institution, our mission is “to prepare graduates who think critically, serve generously, lead purposefully, and live responsibly as stewards of the world they bequeath to future generations.” Within this context, the Department of Religious Studies exists not only to create majors or help students fulfill their humanities requirements. Ultimately each of us is here as part of a team that nourishes new generations of intellectually-curious, thoughtful, and productive citizens who may benefit their families, local communities, states, nations, and the world.

A more recent publication dovetails with such objectives. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) says that liberal education should result in students with “knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world,” “intellectual and practical skills” like critical thinking, “personal and social responsibility” including civic-mindedness, and “integrative learning” that allows them to apply knowledge to new situations (National Leadership Council 2007, 3). In order to get to this point, students’ attention must be consciously and repeatedly drawn to the nature and goals of higher education; they need our help. If left to do this on their own, students may have a more difficult time making sense of how the pieces fit into the whole (Davis 1995, 42–43). As the Boyer report puts it, “Many students graduate having accumulated whatever number of courses is required, but still lacking a coherent body of knowledge or any inkling as to how one sort of information might relate to others” (1998, 6). This may be especially true in large research universities, but it can even be true in small schools if faculty do not make deliberate efforts to encourage synthesis.

Such learning goals arise not only from the ideals of higher education itself but also from prospective employers, who are searching graduates for evidence of mental suppleness. “When evaluating the skills of potential new hires,” says another AAC&U study, “business executives place the greatest emphasis on (1) teamwork skills, (2) critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills, and (3) communication skills” (Hart 2006, 5). The liberal arts, in other words, continues to be valuable not only inherently but also practically:

A 2009 survey for the Association of American Colleges and Universities actually found that more than three-quarters of our nation’s employers recommend that collegebound students pursue a “liberal education.” An astounding eighty-nine percent said they were looking for more emphasis on “the ability to effectively

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4 Some of the research in this section also appears in Blanchard and Bose (2011).
communicate orally and in writing,” and almost as many urged the development of
better “critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills.” Seventy percent said they
were on the lookout for “the ability to innovate and be creative.” (Ungar 2010)5

For a graduate to demonstrate a narrow skill set such as accounting or chemistry
on its own is not enough; professionals working in the global marketplace also need
to be able to synthesize those skills with real-world problems. The report goes on,
“While these employers are somewhat concerned about recent college graduates’ not
having necessary specific job or technical skills, they express the greatest frustration
with the challenges of finding ‘360 degree people’ who have both the specific job/
technical skills and the broader skills (communication skills, teamwork skills,
problem solving skills, and work ethic) necessary to promise greater success for both
the individual and their employer” (Hart 2006, 7).

Thus, the current consensus is that good teaching is not simply about passing along
information, but also about helping students cultivate habits of independent thinking and
the ongoing pursuit of knowledge, often through experiential learning. These new needs
in higher education help make a case for greater and more innovative representation of
religious studies in the liberal arts curriculum. Theology and religious studies professors
have unique contributions to offer twenty-first-century graduates in that we traditionally
have permission to deal explicitly with some of life’s biggest questions, such as who the
human being is, how one can know anything, and how we are related to one another and
to non-human creation.6 Those of us in the humanities can shamelessly embrace the idea
that we contribute to broad training for “personal and social responsibility,” specifically
including “ethical reasoning and action,” which the AAC&U considers a hallmark of
well-educated persons (2008, 6). Whereas many disciplines are oriented toward quantifi-
able knowledge, facts, and certainties, religious studies has always focused on matters
where certainty is elusive, such as narrative, identity, ritual, suffering, and the good;
there is also tremendous potential for experiential learning if we do not shy away from
it in an attempt to seem more “scientific.” Religious studies helps students, as one col-
umnist recently put it, to “befriend The Big Shaggy” – those human behaviors that defy
scientific explanation “because deep down people have passions and drives that don’t
lend themselves to systemic modeling” (Brooks 2010).

Religious studies also, despite its association with things esoteric, can contribute
practical and experiential knowledge that students can actually use when engaging the
world around them – another quality employers covet:

5 The late Steve Jobs and other tech leaders have recently backed up this claim: “Technology alone
is not enough. . . . It’s technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields the
result that makes our heart sing” (Davidson 2011).

6 I am aware of, and largely sympathetic to, the critique by McCutcheon (2003, 199) and others
that religious studies departments may problematically claim special status as guardians of a protected
sphere called “religion” or “spirituality” that is somehow immune to outside analysis or critique. Never-
theless, I do not believe the category “religion” is any more artificial or ideologically prescriptive than
categories like “economy” or “society” or “history” or “medicine.” I see each of these terms as prac-
tical designations that allow different kinds of people to ask the questions that they find most interesting;
these approaches do not have to be mutually exclusive if we are deliberate about cultivating cross-
disciplinary interaction.
Executives will need a broad understanding of other cultures, other languages, history, science, and the arts, if they are to successfully navigate a rapidly changing future business environment. The improved ability to think critically, to understand issues from different points of view, and to collaborate harmoniously with co-workers from a range of cultural backgrounds all enhance a graduate’s ability to contribute to his or her company’s growth and productivity. (AAC&U 2005, 3)

This could as easily be said of medicine, politics, nonprofit work, teaching, the law, or even parenting. Such a concept is not new in religious studies. As one scholar wrote roughly two decades ago, “Models of knowledge based on an exclusive, privileged single lens – whether that of the sciences or the religions or the white middle-class Americans – have come under challenge. In a new, pluralistic setting, in the new openness to the many architectural possibilities of what we take to be the world, the study of religious diversity has a definite role to play” (Paden 1994, vii). A more recent author reiterates the importance of “religious literacy” in light of the fact that “evidence of the public power of religion is overwhelming, particularly in the United States” (Prothero 2007, 5).

While justifications of religious studies by religion scholars are admittedly self-serving, the wide consensus among academics and employers – that qualities such as “teamwork,” “information literacy,” and “integration of learning” are among the intellectual and practical outcomes that are expected of college graduates – should encourage us to consider how our own teaching models enhance or discourage these things. Toward these outcomes, the Boyer report recommended that institutions “remove barriers to and create mechanisms for much more interdisciplinary undergraduate education” (1998, 23). The adult lives of college graduates in the digital age, many of whom will see their hundredth birthdays, will require the sort of psychic flexibility that develops by analyzing real-life problems from a variety of angles. Though the world has always been a complex place, the information revolution means that individuals can be more aware of its complexities than in previous generations. Interdisciplinary thinking becomes a necessity rather than a luxury in this situation; many of the world’s problems “are global in nature” and “none of these problems come in the tidy packages of disciplines. In fact, sometimes the approach used by applying knowledge from a single discipline can create more problems” (Davis 1995, 39). It is incumbent upon us, then, to model the type of learning we hope students will undertake.

Another AAC&U study notes that a number of campuses have already taken steps toward “more integrative, connected learning,” such as first-year seminars, capstone experiences, learning communities, and the like, but such experiences are often limited to small numbers of self-selected participants rather than built into an entire curriculum (Huber and Hutchings 2004, 1). The repeated recommendation from those who study pedagogy and its effects on student learning is that good pedagogy “requires teachers to conceive of and to structure their classrooms as social settings that promote interaction and to invent activities that invite students’ deepest engagement” (Danielewicz 2001, 15). This call for social interaction in class is a far cry from that stereotypical image of the single expert on a stage in front of silent and passive students. It is not difficult to see that integrative learning requires not only multiple disciplines but also multiple pedagogical strategies in order to reach different kinds of students.
While psychologists disagree over whether people have different “learning styles” to which teachers must adapt their methods, there is nevertheless evidence that different kinds of students do respond differently to teaching, based on learning preferences and aptitudes (Paschler et al. 2009, 105; Sternberg 2011). Some, including many who become professors, do very nicely in traditional single-teacher classrooms where a speaker at the front imparts knowledge to hearers in tidy rows. But other students, who might wilt on a diet of lectures, discussions, and readings, may come alive when experiential tactics are implemented or varied types of stimuli are introduced. The first and most important accomplishment of teaching with a colleague is that it heightens a professor’s awareness of the ways her own learning styles and preferences are reflected in her teaching style. Psychologist Robert Sternberg’s research demonstrates that “teachers tend to overestimate the extent to which students match their own profile of learning and thinking styles . . . we are at risk for teaching to ourselves rather than to our students” (Sternberg 2011). Moreover, as professors we are liable to favor – that is, to view as “strong learners” – those students who most closely resemble us. Collaborative teaching, undertaken seriously and reflectively, provides unique opportunities for us to become more conscious of the assumptions and habits we bring into the classroom, and thereby to stretch our teaching styles and make them more flexible in order to teach to a diversity of students.

Different kinds of students also respond to different kinds of personalities. Gender, for example, can be a significant factor in college students’ educational experiences. One study suggests that women, especially, can be negatively affected by experiences with faculty, even if a faculty member has done nothing unprofessional; men and women tend to internalize the same information differently, with women being more likely to feel deflated or dismissed by faculty interactions (Sax 2008, 224). Meanwhile, both male and female students seem to flourish in terms of motivation and achievement under female faculty members (Sax 2008, 226). Collaborative teaching across not only disciplinary but also gender lines is then one more possible way to adjust any unintentionally-harmful dynamics that might be present, particularly in disciplines traditionally dominated by one gender. Professors’ willingness to acknowledge their own disciplinary prejudices or personal limitations is a necessary first step to creating more diverse learning environments.

7 Collaborating in the classroom is one simple way to inject, virtually instantaneously, a greater variety of physical stimuli and background associations for students in a class to experience. “The brain makes subtle associations between what it is studying and the background sensations it has at the time . . . regardless of whether those perceptions are conscious. It colors the terms of the Versailles Treaty with the wasted fluorescent glow of the dorm study room, say; or the elements of the Marshall Plan with the jade-curtain shade of the willow tree in the backyard. Forcing the brain to make multiple associations with the same material may, in effect, give that information more neural scaffolding” (Cary 2010). Having two or more professors in a room results in students encountering two different voices or dialects, two different visual images, perhaps even two different smells, thus creating more associations to enhance the “neural scaffolding” in their brains upon which their learning is built. Even if two professors use the exact same types of pedagogical devices (which is unlikely), there is brain activity going on at an unconscious level.

8 A recent study criticized the field of political science for being overwhelmingly white and male, but it is by no means unique in attracting certain demographics (American Political Science Association 2011).
Collaboration and the Goals of Religious Studies

In thinking through our individual pedagogical goals and reflecting on whether or not collaborative teaching might be helpful in achieving them, it is important for us to reconnect not only with the goals of higher education, but also the goals of our discipline(s). The Teagle-funded AAR White Paper on The Religion Major and Liberal Education took the AAC&U’s proposed learning outcomes as a call to reinvigorate religious studies teaching in particular. The White Paper lays out five objectives for departments seeking to transition into the new educational context of the twenty-first century, four of which I will address below as being potentially well served by cross-disciplinary collaboration in the classroom.9

The second recommendation of the Teagle group is for the religion major to be “multi-disciplinary,” that is, to promote “the understanding and appreciation of a range of methodological and theoretical approaches to religious phenomena” (AAR 2007, 12). Most of us tend toward those approaches in our teaching and scholarship that make us feel most comfortable. In so doing, we may “have a tendency to absolutize method,” forgetting that disciplines are constructed, “invented set[s] of assumptions and practices” that “select reality” (Davis 1995, 26). As a theologian and ethicist, this usually means that I stress perennial theological and ethical questions in most of my courses, often to the exclusion of providing social or historical context, or delving deeply into the writings of any particular thinker. While I do not believe my current teaching is terrible or useless, collaborative teaching is one way to push myself to stretch these pedagogical habits for the sake of my students’ educations.

Take, for example, the semester-long course on the sixteenth century Reformations that I co-taught with a colleague from the history department. Had I taught the course alone, we would no doubt have read a bunch of Luther’s and Calvin’s writings, while discussing virtually nothing of the social, political, or economic context that gave birth to such authors – beyond perhaps humanism and the printing press. I am ashamed to say we would also probably have ignored the Catholic reformers of this era altogether. Instead, our students got the best of both worlds. My colleague, whose specialty is family legal codes in Renaissance Genoa, lectured on Tuesdays about the political and social environment of various parts of Europe before and during the sixteenth century. This provided context for the primary theological texts about which I led discussion on Thursdays. During lectures, I was able to ask questions or make comments that drew attention to important theological points, and during discussions she was able to do the same with regard to the material inputs and outcomes of theological arguments. Sometimes we disagreed, but we were always pleasantly surprised by what the other taught us.

The students found themselves stretched as well. Some of the history majors complained that they felt they were at a disadvantage with the theological texts. Meanwhile some of the religious studies majors disliked being “lectured at” about material they felt they could easily get from the textbook. Nevertheless, most students felt they had gained something valuable and unexpected from the course. These students’ reactions to the course were in line with previous researchers’ findings that “[s]tudents’ learning goes deeper, is more integrated, and is more complex” in situations with more than one

9 The first recommendation, that the religion major be “intercultural and comparative,” exploring “more than one religious tradition” and engaging “the phenomena of religion comparatively across and within cultures” (AAR 2007, 11), may be best served by collaborating within religion departments, at least if those departments are large enough to have scholars trained in different cultural traditions.
teacher; and that they report increased “[s]ensitivity to and respect for other points of view, other cultures, and other people” (Cox 2004, 7). This model was so successful that I repeated it with another colleague, an American colonial and legal historian, in a course called “Religion in American History.” Having learned from prior experience, we divided each of our twice-weekly class meetings into two units of lecture, small-group, and large-group discussion. Again, religious studies students (and I, too) benefited greatly from the concrete context and historical framework that my colleague was able to provide, while history students benefited from having someone trained to recognize and make sense of biblical and theological references. Time and personal inclination do not permit most of us to specialize in more than one methodology; interdisciplinary collaboration is thus one efficient way to leverage our strengths and allow our students to see us doing so.

Cross-disciplinary collaboration also naturally contributes toward the third recommendation of the White Paper, namely that religious studies departments be “critical” in their approaches: “The major teaches students to examine religious phenomena, including issues of ethical and social responsibility, from a perspective of critical inquiry and analysis of both the other and the self” (AAR 2007, 12). Critical thinking is something each of us with academic credentials has been trained to value, so we may think it redundant to elicit anyone else’s help in this regard. Each of us, however, tends to be critical in the same way most of the time, just as we tend toward a particular disciplinary approach. It is easier to see where others’ ideas need critical analysis, but much harder to see gaps or inconsistencies in our own thinking. We may end up in critical thinking ruts from which it is, frankly, difficult for us to emerge and have a new thought. Moreover, if our students do not find our particular critical approach interesting or persuasive, they may decide that learning about religion is not worth their time.

In such cases, there is nothing like bringing in someone trained in a different critical method to raise new questions. For example, I co-taught “Economics and Religion” with a colleague from the economics department. Both of us had done our graduate research at the intersection of these two subjects, but our approaches were like negative images of each other. I studied economic theories as theology, while he studied religious behavior in terms of rational choice. He was persuaded that utterly free markets are the most efficient way to run an economy, while I was persuaded that “love your neighbor as yourself” must condition all economic freedoms. The semester’s readings were an unruly mix of selections from sociologists, theologians, economists, and historians, and each of us could be deeply critical of readings chosen by the other. Despite the “odd couple” running the class, however, many of the students did beautifully. Particularly for those juniors and seniors who had already completed coursework in political science and/or economics, or for those students raised in religious traditions with explicit economic teachings, the conversations in the class were lively and challenging. (The course was far from perfect – more on that later.) While lively conversations are certainly possible with only one professor in the room, having two professors who were willing to risk open disagreement was an important factor in letting students see us as learners, and giving them permission to engage in their own critical analyses. As one author writes, “There is no more effective method [than team teaching] of simulating in the classroom the real life conditions of conflicting demands and competing values” (Shafer 2001, 1).

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10 Here Cox is summarizing the results of two articles (Tinto [1995] and MacGregor, Tinto, and Linbald [2000]) that compiled existing studies of student learning communities.
The fourth and fifth Teagle recommendations are very closely related: the religion major should be “integrative,” giving students opportunities to apply “theoretical knowledge of religious phenomena to lived, practical contexts, both historical and current”; it should also be “creative and constructive,” employing “knowledge of religious phenomena and the skills of religious studies in the solving of complex problems, including those raised in the personal and social engagement issues of life, death, love, violence, suffering, and meaning” (AAR 2007, 12). Again, while it is indeed possible for any one of us to employ integrative, creative, and constructive pedagogy when teaching alone, it is sometimes difficult to move toward such application on our own. Perhaps we feel pressure to cover so much material in one semester that there is no time left for innovation or experiential learning; cross-disciplinary collaboration is one way to remind ourselves that integration and construction may be at least as important as the actual information we include in our teaching. Integration and creativity can also entail a lot more work than traditional methods of lecture or discussion; it is more difficult to be complacent about our teaching when a colleague is depending on us to carry our weight. “Working in a teaching team,” says one professor, “consistently inspires your best work” (Sorenson 2002, 4).

To this point, one of the most rewarding classes I have taught is one that heavily emphasized experiential learning, which I never would have undertaken on my own because it would have seemed utterly overwhelming. During an intensive four-week May term I collaborated with a sociologist from my own institution, together with a sociologist and an ethicist from a seminary in Chicago, on parallel courses called “Globalization, Ethics, and Food.” The most important goal of the courses was to foster greater critical consciousness about food and consumption by exposing students to a variety of texts from multiple analytical approaches – sociological, psychological, theo-ethical, journalistic, and filmic – as well as a variety of experiences. Some days the two Alma classes met together, other days we met separately. Students in my section were asked to keep a food journal of everything they ate during the term, including weekly reflections on how what they were learning related to their food intake. With the help of our Academic Service Learning office, they also organized and executed a campus drive for a local food pantry, in order to integrate their in-class learning with local, on-the-ground needs.

Thus far I might have gone on my own, but the best parts of the course took place off campus and involved the combined efforts of all four faculty members in order to become realized. The Alma instructors took our students to Chicago for a two-day field trip in which we visited a semi-famous (in sociology circles) Hyde Park diner; had a tour of the Board of Trade and Mercantile Exchange where we watched people trading products and futures like corn, soy, beef, and pork; ate South Indian cuisine and Korean barbeque, both of which were a first-time experience for many of our students; packed boxes at the city’s central food depository; and did clean-up work at a Catholic Worker house that had a community garden. But it was not only urban food settings that we explored. The next week we visited, together with our guests from the seminary, two farms in central Michigan – one that produced milk on a factory-style assembly line, and one that raised and slaughtered organic, free-range beef and cage-free chickens. The physical contrast between the two farms was stark, giving students smells, sights, sounds, and textures to think about when reflecting on their own consumption. This deeply integrative and experiential course was my single most complicated teaching experience in terms of planning and execution, but in the end it was an intensely satisfying experience for both my students and me, made possible through cross-disciplinary collaboration.
Realities of Collaboration: Pitfalls and Strategies

Collaborative teaching is something we should do only if it helps us meet our pedagogical goals more effectively than teaching alone. Not all collaborative teaching is necessarily effective; if we are not careful, it can undermine the very interdisciplinarity we are trying to model or result in a colossal waste of faculty and students’ time (Tan 2002). Perhaps the biggest pitfall is precisely the issue of expertise, which is often perpetuated unintentionally due to a lack of time and reflection on the part of teachers. Ideally, collaborative teaching “can be a very powerful way of dismantling the outmoded notion that teaching is a matter of one individual’s mastery of a specialized subject matter”; it is a way to challenge students’ assumptions that “a college course [is] legitimate only when information comes from one source” (Beavers and DeTurck 2000, 12). However, this can happen only with deliberate effort on the part of the teachers; whether in a team-taught course or a learning community, careful integration must occur at every stage of planning and execution. Studies have shown, for example, that “serial” models of team teaching in which teachers treat collaboration as a means of reducing work load, dividing up the term into separately-taught lessons (perhaps not even attending one another’s lessons), are essentially no more effective than individually-taught courses.11 “Attendance by both faculty members demonstrates to the students that two potentially separate courses are one in the eyes of the faculty”; without such commitment to the process, collaboration is unlikely to have much of an effect (Beavers and DeTurck 2000, 12).

Even with both professors present, serial teaching can take over. In my first combined history and religion course, for example, my colleague and I were unwittingly perpetuating the idea that history was about facts (best learned in a lecture from an “expert” historian) and religion was about feelings or opinions (best discussed sitting in a circle with an “expert” theologian or therapist). In our teaching, my colleague and I each went instinctively to our default positions based on our disciplines, habits, and comfort levels. Once we became aware of the problem, we challenged ourselves by taking turns running class the way the other would have done it; as a result I made my very first lecture with slides, which I learned was not the end of the world and even opened up doors of communication with certain students. This problem came to light because we consistently discussed how the course was going. In my team-taught economics and religion class, on the other hand, we made the mistake of pairing up to teach without scheduling regular meetings during the term. We were not diligent about creating “ongoing opportunities to reflect on and analyze [our] teaching” or to “plan, assess, and revise [our] individual and collaborative efforts” (Supovitz and Christman 2005, 651). Thus, although some students were not flourishing, we did not make any midterm adjustments to encourage greater synthesis between our approaches; in the end, any synthesis that students did achieve through that course was mostly of their own creation. Stronger students did well, but weaker students were left in the dust. Strong collaboration, in other words, does not happen by accident; truly “powerful collaboration” is characterized by “a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice . . . engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning” (DuFour 2004, 3).

11 A study at the University of Toronto (Neumann et al. 2006) found that most examples of team teaching there were actually “tag-team” or serial teaching. Genuinely team-taught courses in which two or more instructors shared most or all classes, were the exception.
Besides perpetuating disciplinary stereotypes, other obvious potential pitfalls in collaborative teaching are more personal in nature. “When faculty are asked what they give up when they join an interdisciplinary team, they almost always reply ‘autonomy.’ . . . ‘When I teach alone, it’s my class, my grades, my disputes, and I create the atmosphere. On a team, I lose my control of those things’” (Davis 1995, 120). In my own experience with four faculty members on two campuses working on the team-taught food course, there were many opportunities for each of us to be frustrated with others’ work and planning styles – though it turned out to be well worth any sacrifices. Other frustrations collaborative teachers mention are a lack of institutional support in terms of resources or faculty load; burn-out from the extra work; a loss of research time; a sense of being unprepared academically to teach outside one’s discipline; and loss of flexibility (Davis 1995, 120). If any one of these frustrations becomes overwhelming, it can discourage some teachers from branching out again.

Moreover, team teaching is not always popular with students. In addition to basic matters of learning style or preference for certain instructors, a classroom with more than one teacher in it can come across as disorganized or unfocused. “Team teaching tends to confuse students,” writes Ingrid Shafer; “It does so on purpose. The beginning of learning is the Socratic admission of ignorance. . . . If students are to function adequately beyond the artificial classroom environment, they must realize that important issues are complex and open to numerous and often contradictory interpretations” (Shafer 2001, 2). Thus, while it is acceptable for students to feel somewhat uncomfortable with team teaching, it is not acceptable for instructors to leave them there. Without consistently calling students to deliberately reflect upon their experience in an interdisciplinary environment, there is little reason to think that they will learn anything special from it. One study found that students in collaborative courses remained largely unaware of any collaboration between faculty members, perhaps because most of it goes on behind the scenes (Davis 1995, 126).

Good design, therefore, is the key to effective team teaching, no less than it is the key to effective individual teaching; we cannot just throw two professors into a room and hope that it will helpfully shape students’ minds in constructive ways. And what seemed like good design before the term began may need reworking in the middle of the semester. This kind of effort requires time and support on the part of faculty members themselves, but also on the part of administrators and funders. The Boyer report notes that, in spite of what we know about best practices in teaching, for the most part, fundamental change has been shunned; universities have opted for cosmetic surgery, taking a nip here and a tuck there, when radical reconstruction is called for. Serious responses to complaints about undergraduate teaching have generated original and creative pedagogical and curricular experiments. But too often bold and promising efforts have vanished after external grant support disappeared, have withered on the fringes of the curriculum, or have been so compromised that their originality has been lost. (Boyer Commission 1998, 6)

Moreover, they note, research productivity remains a higher priority at many institutions than teaching excellence. In such a climate, where resource allocation does not demonstrate a communal commitment to effective pedagogy – let alone effective collaboration – we can expect to see teaching remain each individual professor’s private business.
In the final analysis, what makes a great team teacher is most likely the same thing that makes a great teacher: relentless work. According to an internal study by Teach for America, what sets great teachers apart from good or ineffective ones is that they maintain a constant focus on learning outcomes, and a commitment to looking for ways to improve; they plan exhaustively, but they also check students constantly to ensure they understand what the teacher meant them to (Ripley 2010, 62). Another author concurs that “Big Idea Number One” in learning communities should be “Ensuring That Students Learn”; “the core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn” (DuFour 2004, 1). All these things can potentially happen even better in a collaboratively-taught class where there are two heads, two sets of eyes and ears, two pairs of hands, rather than just one. We learn from each other, encouraging each other to excel. It may very well be that a few “great teachers” do not need to collaborate in order to be great; but even in these cases it may still be in students’ best interests to have excellent teachers sharing their passions and modeling their skills with newer faculty, or with faculty who seem to be less successful in fostering student learning. The “most powerful synergy” in collaborative teaching and learning “occurs when teaching teams work closely to create their own teaching communities even as they lead learning communities” of students (MacGregor 2000, 1).

Interdisciplinary teaching is possible even under institutional constraints. The ideal might be to have collaborative learning communities written into our institutions’ bylaws (or at least to have team-taught courses count as part of one’s regular load), since the outcomes of such structures include happier, more motivated teachers, and students who learn more (Cox 2004). Barring this, it may be necessary to get a bit creative in our strategies, but each small act of collaboration can help create a long-term shift toward institutional change. Those who are adept at finding external funding might be more likely to persuade a dean or provost of the need for a semester-long, team-taught course if that course came with its own resources. Religion departments have particular sources of funding open to them that might support cross-disciplinary collaboration (as with our food course, which was funded by a grant from the Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.]). Some professors might choose to take on a course overload as a way of making team teaching a reality. If an overload is undesirable, faculty members could link two courses together with a shared problem or text; they might have periodic classroom exchanges, large group meetings, or small group assignments combining students from the different classes. Less time-consuming options might include joint field trips or short-term professorial classroom exchanges. For example, an English colleague and I did a one-week exchange between our two first-year seminars: “Coming of Age in Literature” (his) and “Religion and Sexuality” (mine). One week both of our classes read the same book (Persepolis by Marjane Satrapi) with different questions in mind; on Tuesday he and I traded classrooms in order to learn what the other’s students were thinking and to convey discussion points from our own classrooms, and on Thursday all of us met together for combined small- and large-group discussions. While such short-term exchanges do not require as much effort and have proportionately less impact than a semester-long collaboration, it is nevertheless an incremental step and a reminder to students that various disciplines have overlapping questions and concerns, with multiple ways to approach the same text. Another idea altogether is to invite non-faculty into the classroom for one or more meetings – whether Student Life administrators (Nash 2009), upper-class students, or community members not affiliated with the institution at all. A move like this can go even farther toward challenging the default model of disciplinary expertise.
Collaboration as Heightened Attention

Despite all appearances, this is not really an article about how to perfect the art of collaborative teaching or how to bring learning communities to your school. It is, rather, a call for us to be more self-aware and reflective about our default teaching techniques. I am not proposing collaborative teaching as a magic bullet that will lay to rest all the evils that attend hegemonic models of Eurocentric or androcentric or anthropocentric education. One team-taught class here and there will not change overnight the habits cultivated by thousands of individually-taught ones. For that matter, it must be re-emphasized that teaching alone is not always an evil; almost all of us can cite examples of individual teachers who managed to benefit students despite (or precisely because of) their limitations.

Collaborative teaching can be just as problematic as individual teaching if it is done thoughtlessly. Interdisciplinary or integrative learning will not automatically occur without deliberate and self-conscious work on the teachers’ parts. Ultimately, good collaborative teaching is subject to all of the same standards as good teaching; it takes hard work and attention to students. Collaboration is simply one particular technique we might employ, one site at which we can challenge ourselves to think through a host of pedagogical issues that we face every day. Its unique benefit is that it allows for thoughtful dialogue between teachers who share an educational context and mission, and who can challenge one another to excel in meeting the students’ needs in that particular context. It is a means of turning our teaching into “community property” by “putting an end to pedagogical solitude” (Shulman 2004, 455–59). Complicated knowledge begins with us. We cannot simply assume that our students will figure out how to create a learning community on their own—we may also model a fruitful learning community for them.

Finally, it is always necessary to make our goals explicit to both ourselves and our students. When we do so, we may notice that we have greater difficulty meeting some goals than others. Perhaps we do very well with comparative approaches to religion, but we are less adept at methodological or critical diversity. We may be very effective with students who like to talk in class, but are failing to reach others who prefer not to think out loud. Maybe we are inspiring the students who think like us, but are alienating those who think our approach is flawed or incomprehensible. When we realize we need help meeting our goals, we would be wise to ask ourselves who we know that could help us, and then to ask for help. In this small act of pedagogical and scholarly humility, we open ourselves up to learning new things ourselves, and may also reach students who might not otherwise choose to think critically about religion.

Bibliography


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